

JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S RETURN TO NEW YORK (1930)

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In June 1930 John Howard Lawson ended his first two years in the motion picture industry.¹⁾

Lawson wanted to escape from Hollywood. He wanted to return to the theatre in New York.

At Union Station in Los Angeles a crowd of the Lawsons' friends gathered to see them off. Most of them were people the Lawsons had met in Hollywood; but "they had become...near and dear to us".

At the station there was a lot of shouting and laughing-- "rather artificial good spirits"-- but as the train began to move there was silence.

John Howard Lawson stood in the vestibule of the moving train and looked at the faces of his friends--Francis Faragoh, Edwin

1) For an account of these years, 1928-1930, see "John Howard Lawson's Introduction to Hollywood, I" (Keiei to keizai, Vol. 63-4, No. 172, March 1984) and "John Howard Lawson's Introduction to Hollywood, II" (Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 25, No. 1, July 1984).

The basic source for both these articles and for the present one is John Howard Lawson's unpublished autobiography, which his daughter Susan Amanda Lawson has permitted me to use. The present article collates two tentatively titled chapters dealing with the same material, "Landscape" and "State of Mind". Lawson's structure is changed but his language is closely followed.

Justus Mayer, Samuel Ornitz, W. L. River, "writers whose work was rich in promise"--and felt "the irony of their situation" and shared their frustration.

Lawson thought he was escaping from Hollywood. But he would be back there in less than a year.

The economic depression had begun, but the "accoutrements" of the Lawsons' personal lives in Hollywood were "so lavish" that they seemed to have nothing to do with the economic crisis-- "or to be in fantastic opposition to its meaning to most Americans".

Lawson says he was engaged in the pursuit of happiness, which was simply the pursuit of money. That was the American way of life.

The American way of life had been "fractured" and "disorganized" by the depression crisis.

In the 1920s John Howard Lawson had tried to find his identity in rebellion against the main currents of American life.

In 1930 he was less a rebel, but he was more cut off than he had ever been from the common experience of most Americans.

He continued to rebel in his thinking and feeling.

He rebelled against the course he had chosen.

"My mind [he says] was as alive and my reading as omnivorous... my frustrated creativity, my uncertainty regarding my future in the theatre, made a rage to find a new kind of consciousness. Everything was new--but I found myself in this novel situation without the mental resources to deal with it. Others were in the same situation. The culture of the country was undergoing a momentous change".

Lawson was convinced that the "aesthetic rebellion" of the 1920s had been a failure.

This conviction of his had antedated the economic crisis, which showed "how wrong" he and his friends had been in their estimate of the American situation.

They had assumed capitalism was "impregnable".

Their rebellion against an authority that they thought was too strong for them did not include any means of dealing with the actualities of the depression.

John Howard Lawson says, in the 1960s, that it is "impossible" to understand the intellectual developments of the early 1930s unless they are seen as "a direct result" of the cultural "decline" of the late 1920s: "The radicalism that began to take shape in 1932 makes no sense if it is detached from the moods and questions that antedated the depression".

As the train climbed the pass toward the Mojave Desert, the Lawsons' children became "difficult" and had to be put to bed.

Lawson then sat on the platform of the observation car.

A journey by train had always been "a spiritual voyage" for him. Now he was crossing a continent "that would never be what it had been, or what [he] thought it to be".

Lawson had a lot to think about.

During the last couple of years he had done more reading and "harder thinking" than at any time since his days in Paris at the beginning of the 1920s.

At M.G.M. there had been "so little challenge" in his work that he had sought other outlets for his mind. He felt that he "had to understand what had happened" to him, just as he had felt at the closing down of the New Playwrights Theatre in 1928.

In 1928 he had thought about his experience in the 1920s: "The rebellion of the twenties with all its fervor and accomplishment had lost its way in the wasteland. The failure was not signalized by the depression: it was psychological and subjective".

Lawson had read portions of James Joyce's *Work in Progress* in

transition. It had seemed to him that "the chaos of words was the dissolution of a noble mind--as tragic as Lear's madness".

In 1964, Lawson says there is "undiminished power" in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, "but it is the power of a darkened intellect". Joyce's protagonist is "more like No Man than Everyman". In *Finnegan's Wake*, Lawson says, "the disintegration of the word has brought the disintegration of the human personality":

"It is a long descent from the middling man, Prufrock or Bloom, to the fragments of a broken doll, from the stubborn labor of Sisyphus to the fall of Humpty Dumpty. In *Finnegan's Wake* the fall of man has become a verbal joke: 'The great fall of the offwall entailed at short short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan, are solid man, that the humptyhillhead of himself promptly sends an enquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytoes...'. In the beginning was the word, but Joyce goes back before the beginning, 'before Joshua judges had given us numbers or Leviticus committed deuteronomy...'. The Bible, like all the other memories and legends of Man's greatness, dissolves in nothingness".

Lawson had tried to analyze the difference between the "nihilism" of *Work in Progress* and earlier experiments with words such as those of the Symbolist poets and the Imagists, who discovered "new sensibilites". In Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) "fragmented words were afloat on a stream of consciousness".

Lawson had considered Gertrude Stein "a rather oldfashioned woman" who "could not sympathize with the 'lost generation' because she had her own secure existence, her small circle of friends, her aesthetic sensibility. Even her life-long devotion to Alice B. Toklas was comfortably middleclass. It was the dead end, the tender and absurd conclusion of the genteel life".

Lawson himself had fought middle class conventions throughout the 1920s, "but these values were part of my being and I had not

been able to escape from them". Lawson, "groping in a mist", began to see that Joyce's Humpty Dumpty was "the symbol of the dismembered person, the last stage of bourgeois futility". For Joyce, "the artist was the last bourgeois individualist, and when he could not maintain his individuality, it was the world's end, 'not with a bang but a whimper' ".

Lawson himself had practiced "absurdity" in the theatre of the 1920s-- "because our society seemed absurd"-- but he had found that absurdity "substituted sentiment for imagination". Absurdity was "a lament for lost values rather than a search for the full expression of Man's spirit".

Lawson quotes from Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper* (1929): "Our cosmos may be farcical or it may be pathetic, but it has not the dignity of tragedy, and we cannot accept it as such". This was a summary of the 1920s, Lawson says, but to him theatre without tragedy was "a contradiction in terms, a betrayal of the theatre's heritage". Lawson "hated" the false passion of the drawing room play, but expressionism "repeated these same emotions with increasing despair, self-pity and disintegration of character".

On the observation platform of the train taking him East in the summer of 1930, John Howard Lawson thought of Eugene O'Neill's last two plays, *Strange Interlude* and *Dynamo*.

Strange Interlude, Lawson says, is O' Neill's first acceptance of the bourgeois situation. Its plot is a nineteenth century one--the woman who has a child by a man who is not her husband--and it is all "mysteriously ordained". But there was "no contentment" in O' Neill, Lawson says, and "his conformity had to lead to an outburst of violence" in *Dynamo*.

Lawson had found *Dynamo* "unbelievably close" to his own

Nirvana in details of characterization and lines of dialogue.²⁾ "But what struck me most forcibly was the total difference in our handling of an identical theme. In *Nirvana* Bill Weed talks of 'an Electro-magnetic Christ' and in *Dynamo* Rēuben Light asserts 'There is no God but electricity' ".³⁾

But in 1926 Lawson had dreamed of "a mystic reconciliation" of science and religion, "a cosmic victory for the human spirit". O' Neill, on the other hand, had seen no hope of reconciliation, no hope for Man. O' Neill, Lawson says, "went back to the old idea of an absolute enmity between religion and science: without God, we are doomed, and science is the agent of our destruction".

Lawson says that in the next years he continued to ask the questions he had asked in *Nirvana*, but now he "denied" metaphysical solutions: "I was less concerned with the universe and more with the American scene".

"*Dynamo* celebrates the collapse of reason. The words make sense, but frenzy dissolves the psyche. There is the Freudian passion between son and mother, but the monstrous dynamo takes the place of the human mother and commands senseless violence.

Nirvana ends with a rocket in space. *Dynamo* ends with murder and violence. The murder in O' Neill's play is the sacrifice of a young girl which is in many of my plays including *Nirvana*, but O' Neill has stripped it of its ritual significance: it is the irredeemable blood guilt of fallen man, who disintegrates as

2) Here Lawson briefly quotes from several critics (Gilbert Gabriel, Joseph Wood Krutch, Richard Watts Jr.) who in 1929 noticed the close resemblance of the theme of *Dynamo* to that of Lawson's *Nirvana* (1926).

3) *Nirvana* has not been published. For the only complete description of *Nirvana* available, see "John Howard Lawson's Unpublished *Nirvana*", Keiei to Keizai, March 1978.

he falls. Reuben Light is as much a broken puppet as Humpty Dumpty".

Lawson says that looking out from the observation car platform at this point he could see the dry desert wind whipping dust around the train.

Lawson could see the fallacies in O'Neill's work, but he himself had no answers to the questions that "burned" in his mind. He wanted to create "living" people. He wanted to be a "living" person. He knew there was "a great power of life" in him.

On the next day, as the train went through Kansas, the rolling prairie flattened and the grasslands became corn fields. "There was no blight on the green corn", Lawson says, "yet it was a landscape in crisis". He had tried to write about the Mid West, he points out, and many others who had been born and raised there had written about it. "But they wrote about it in the past tense. They wrote of baffled childhood and family sorrows and departure, escape from a barren land".

On the train crossing Kansas, Lawson thought of Ezra Pound, born in Idaho, and Ernest Hemingway, born in Illinois. He wondered "whether they had lost some essential part of their heritage".

Lawson had thought of the culture of the 1920s--"our culture"--as being "completely detached" from the Middle West. "The artist left it, necessarily, at adolescence and never returned". "Our culture" of the 1920s was shaped in New York and Paris, "and this may have been one of the reasons for its decline".

Lawson had seen many indications that the revolt of the 1920s--"our revolt"--had run its course. *The Little Review*, born in Chicago in 1914, had died in Paris in May 1929.⁴⁾ The Provincetown Theatre had come to its end a few weeks after the stock market crash in 1929.⁵⁾

On the observation platform of the Chief, Lawson remembered the song sung by the whole cast of his *Processional* in 1925.⁶⁾ "The words echoed to the rhythm of the train's wheels". He asked himself: "Was *Processional* an end or a beginning?"

The Chief reached Kansas City at nine o'clock that night. The sleeping car the Lawson family was in was detached from the train and placed on a siding. There would be a wait of four hours.

Lawson went for a walk in Kansas City. The streets were almost empty. He felt that he was alone in a barren place.

Then Lawson came to a street of shops and lights. A burlesque theatre was plastered with brightly colored signs and photographs of naked women. He went in. "The show was exactly like Minsky's on Second Avenue--the stale jokes, the tired chorus, the ceremonial display of the stripper's anatomy". It was the last burlesque show Lawson ever attended.

On the third day of the Lawsons' trip East, they saw green valleys and woodlands. The number of towns and cities increased.

"All across the country", Lawson says, "there was a stirring of anger among the people".

4) Lawson quotes from Margaret Anderson's editorial in the last issue of *The Little Review* and from answers to a questionnaire sent to leading authors. "The questions--What do you fear most? What is your world view? Why do you go on living?--were foolish, but the answers were chilling". Lawson was depressed by "the lack of dignity" in these communications from such as Richard Aldington, Enrico Prampolini, Djuna Barnes, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, et al.

5) Here Lawson writes about the unsuccessful attempt to save the Provincetown.

6) This song, "This Land is My Land, This Land is Your Land", is usually attributed, apparently mistakenly, to Woody Guthrie.

The National Unemployment Day march in 1930 could have been called "Processional Day", Lawson thinks. In cities throughout the United States a million and a quarter people marched. Sometimes there were violent clashes with the police. In New York over 100,000 people defied a police ban on marching. Many people were beaten by policemen. William Z. Foster and other members of the Communist Party were arrested.

At that time, though, Lawson says, he was not very much interested in the Communists. He was "deeply" interested in "the people". He tried to imagine their feelings, but he could not establish "kinship" with them. He knew only that his basic assumptions about his country were "wrong".

In the 1920s he had thought that the power structure was "impregnable". He had "cried out in anger against a social order that was "fixed and strong". Now, suddenly, the weakness of that social order was revealed.

"No one supposed that a revolution was imminent", Lawson says in 1964, "but the system was breaking down". The system was "incompetent" as well as "oppressive". "Capitalism lived by profit, but the profits were dwindling, while breadlines lengthened in the streets".

The economic and social changes in the United States were "so public and startling" that "no one with an open mind or decent conscience could be unaffected", Lawson writes.

As for American intellectuals, their first response to the economic crisis was in the form of a controversy.

The Humanist controversy was initiated by a manifesto published in the January 1930 issue of *The Bookman*, whose editor Seward Collins called for a defense of "Humanism"--the traditional values of

morality, decorum, "classic" ideas of beauty and restraint, as opposed to "Realism", which, Lawson says, "bore witness to human suffering and degradation".

For Lawson it was "curious" that after twenty years the views of the New Humanists became a matter of current controversy.

In the *New Republic* in March 1930 numerous writers, including Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Mathew Josephson, Katherine Anne Porter and F. O. Matthiessen, signed a statement asking whether it was possible to name a contemporary work of art either produced by an American Humanist or encouraged or approved by one.

In the *New Masses* in April 1930 there was "a more violent denunciation" of New Humanism, referred to by Michael Gold and V. I. Calverton as "Literary Fascism".

In 1930, Lawson says, he himself regarded New Humanists Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt as "doddering old fogies" whose ideas about the arts were "dismal". But he "could not equate their classicism with fascism".

Lawson realized, however, that a new period of history had been entered, that a debate "in these terms" would have been "unthinkable" a year, "or even a month", earlier than early 1930.

In *The Critique of Humanism* (1930) Malcom Cowley asked what "validity" the New Humanism had for the factory workers of New Bedford and Gastonia, for the beet farmers of Colorado, for the automobile assembly line workers of Michigan.

This was "a good question", Lawson says in 1964, then asks: "But what did *our* literature or any of the arts (the culture of the aesthetic rebellion) have to do with these workers?"

The Humanist controversy "fascinated and bewildered" Lawson: "The most incredible thing about it was... that More and Babbitt

were permitted to purloin the word Humanist”.

As John Howard Lawson looks back from the 1960s, he perceives the “far-reaching consequences” of this “linguistic coup”. Lawson says: “The conservatives were actually launching a political attack on sensitivity to social problems, and they were allowed to pose as guardians of sensitivity. This deceit was possible because upper class attitudes permeated our culture to such a degree that many of those who opposed the conservatives shared some of their assumptions”.

Here, Lawson refers to Lewis Mumford, who believed the two basic philosophies in American life were the spiritual concern of the New Humanism and the deterministic doctrine of the New Mechanism. Mumford praised the former for its “assertion of the dignity of the human spirit”, but urged and organic unity of both philosophies.⁷⁾

Lawson says that, although he did not agree with Mumford in 1930, Mumford raised questions that a few years earlier had seemed “world shaking” to Lawson.

In 1930 Lawson’s “place” was with the opposition to the New Humanists, “even though they carried banners ‘with a strange device’-- ‘realism’, which [Lawson] associated with bourgeois conventions, especially in the theatre, and shadowy letters which seemed to spell out ‘anti-humanism’ ”.

Lawson knew that the Humanist controversy had an historical background that went back to the issues that had developed around Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* in the early 1900s. Lawson knew about Dreiser’s “assaults” on the genteel tradition.

Lawson had already begun to read earlier American literature

7) Lawson quotes from Mumford’s article in *The Critique of New Humanism* edited by C. Hartley Gratton, 1930.

and books dealing with the American past. Carl Sandburg's *Lincoln: The Prairie Years* had been a "revelation" to Lawson, but it seemed far away from the 1930s. In Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* (1928) Lawson found "a closer connection" between past and present, "and a more mysterious projection of unknown forces".

But in 1930 Lawson's knowledge was "so fragmentary" and "so stultified" by platitudinous concepts that he wondered whether American society had developed as a conflict between a genteel upper class tradition and a realistic democratic spirit.

To Lawson this explanation appeared "too simple" and "much too political" to explain "the chaos of our time".

More than anything else that he had read about the American past, Henry Adams' *Education* had moved Lawson.

"Yet Adams was a member of the upper class and in many ways typical of the rational and moral assumptions of the genteel tradition.

When Adams stood in the Hall of Dynamos at the Paris Exposition of 1900, doubting all that he had believed about history, 'his historical neck broken by forces totally new', he faced the twentieth century."⁸⁾

In the early 1930s Lawson could see that "Adams' class status, as well as his beliefs, faced dangers and possible dissolution." There was a "vast movement of people and forces", Lawson says, "and one could not dismiss Adams or his 19th century heritage without distorting the nature of American experience".

Lawson believes that although Walt Whitman was "closer" to the democratic ethos, it would be "misleading to posit a fixed opposition" between Adams and Whitman. The "proud music" of Whitman's verse was "clouded with intimations of tragedy" after the Civil

8) Lawson quotes from *The Education of Henry Adams*, 1931.

War.

At sundown on the third day of the Lawsons' trip to New York, their train went through the industrial suburbs of Cincinnati, "and the factories were reddened by a flaming sunset".⁹⁾

John Howard Lawson thought of two novels he had recently read, novels that had "the sense of history suggested at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*" -- William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*.

"*The Sound and the Fury* [Lawson writes]. showed a society or a class, the rulers of the Old South and the society they administered, in process of dissolution. The stream of consciousness, the fragmented words, suggest disintegration to the point of madness. Yet it is placed in a rational framework of history; it is part of our American experience".

"*Look Homeward, Angel* is a more impassioned and hopeful farewell to the past. The story begins with a summary of historical destiny...At the end, Eugene Gant, meeting the spirit of his dead brother Ben, dreams of lost cities and 'the voyage, the search for the happy land'. Eugene wants to find himself, and an end of hunger, and happiness. Ben answers: 'There is no happy land. There is no end to hunger'. Eugene speaks of the soul, haunting 'the million streets of life, living its spectral nightmare of hunger and desire'. Eugene knows that he is alone: 'He stood upon the ramparts of his soul, before the lost land of himself' ".¹⁰⁾

Lawson says that before Thomas Wolfe died, Wolfe "would find that he was no longer lost among the streets and faces, that his soul had a place among the voyagers and pioneers".

As for Lawson himself, in 1930 he knew that he could not fulfill himself unless he "partook" of the American experience.

9) Sunsets are a common setting in many of Lawson's plays.

10) Eugene Gant has much in common with John Howard Lawson's main character in *Roger Bloomer* (1923).

Lawson later learned that his feeling of isolation, his feeling of "the soul's hunger", was fairly common among men and women of his generation.

Here, Lawson quotes from an April 1928 letter from poet Hart Crane to critic Gorham B. Munson: "The spiritual disintegration of our period becomes more painful to me every day, so that I now find myself balked by doubt at the validity of practically every metaphor I coin".¹¹⁾

Then Lawson refers to critic Van Wyck Brooks, "who seemed to sit on a serene Olympus in Connecticut", who describes these years as his "season in Hell". Brooks, Lawson notes, suffered "a mental breakdown that enveloped him in 'a purgatorial mist', so that 'over the gate of the thirties, one seemed to see the words Abandon hope, all ye who enter here'".¹²⁾

Next Lawson mentions the titles of some works by poet Walter Lowenfels, who, living in Paris, published *Finale of Seem* in 1929, and who, "bemused by a poet's intuition of fate", dedicated his next three books to the dead, *Apollinaire* (1930), *Elegy for D. H. Lawrence* (1932), and *The Suicide* (1932) in memory of Hart Crane.

Lawson says: "History casts a long shadow of danger across the thirties, and it leads to a decade of stark tragedy".

"The sense of history", Lawson says, "the search for reality and for the buried heart, create the continuity between the twenties and the thirties".

In June 1930 John Howard Lawson and his family arrived in New York. They stayed at the Brevoort Hotel for a few days. They

11) Lawson quotes from a citation by Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties*, 1955.

12) Lawson quotes from Brooks' *Days of the Phoenix*, 1957.

enjoyed meeting old friends. On the surface, "nothing seemed changed". They "celebrated". Early in the morning they would end their "revels" at Sam Schwartz's speakeasy, where "Tiny" Ziman still played the piano.¹³⁾

Lawson met his agent Harold Freedman. Their first talk showed Lawson that he had "overestimated" his prospects in the theatre in New York. The Theatre Guild was not interested in *Death in an Office*. Director Harold Clurman was concerned with other matters.

Lawson and his wife and children "retired" to the country.

Lawson was too "unsettled" to undertake new writing, so he revised two plays.

"I was in a vaccum," John Howard Lawson concludes. He was between careers and between decades.

13) Ziman had composed the music for Lawson's *The International* (1928).